

**Abstract**

While there have been increasing opportunities for sport psychology practitioners in cricket there are concerns regarding employment practices within the field, and the knock-on impact upon the practitioner. The aim of this research was to explore the experiences, reflections, challenges and opportunities perceived by practitioners regarding their own roles delivering sport psychology in elite cricket. Participants were 12 sport psychology practitioners (8 male and 4 female) purposively selected based on their experience working within cricket. Participants were interviewed to gain an understanding of their experiences working as a sport psychology practitioner. The data were thematically analyzed resulting in seven higher order themes emerging: *the role; perceptions of the psychologist; consultation approach; limiting factors; first team environment; challenges faced; and proposed changes*. Results suggest that there are similarities in the challenges experienced across professional clubs and at different levels in cricket. Broader challenges for the clubs, National Governing Body, and the sport psychology profession also emerged.

**Keywords:**

Cricket, applied practice, practitioner, role clarity

## **Working as a Sport Psychology Practitioner in Professional Cricket: Challenges, Experiences and Opportunities**

Cricket, as a sport, presents significant psychological challenges to players, coaches and support staff. In particular, the long duration of games, and variability in the overall duration of games can make psychological strategies difficult to apply (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). The psychological nature of these challenges in the sport lend themselves to engagement with sport psychology, and sport psychology practitioners. While this is the case sport psychology provision within cricket has lagged behind many other sports and domains, particularly in comparison to Olympic sports in the UK (Cotterill, 2017).

The sport is relatively unique in that performance is simultaneously individual- and team-focused. Although a team sport, cricket comprises discrete passages of play, that involve a player (the bowler) bowling the ball at another player (the batsman – cf. Smith, Young, Figgins, & Arthur, 2016). At the same time the batsman is also taking on the rest of the opposition team in the field (Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2007). These batting and bowling skills can be described as “closed skills” requiring the execution of a complex sequence of actions with minimum error tolerance and specific time constraints (Müller, Abernethy, & Farrow, 2006; Renshaw & Fairweather, 2000). The format of the game itself also varies significantly. There are currently 20-overs per team (three-four hours), 50-overs per team (seven-eight hours), and four or five day formats of the game (where both teams bat and bowl twice each - Cotterill, 2017). In the context of cricket an ‘over’ represents a series of six balls ‘bowled’ at the batsmen by one specific ‘bowler’. At the end of this series of balls there is a slight delay in play then another player begins another series of six balls. These different formats of the game, in turn, can present varied psychological challenges. In particular, challenges relating: to fatigue; rest and recovery (particularly for four and five-day games); concentration; emotional control; and audience effects (crowds can range from a few

hundred for four-day games up to tens of thousands for one-day and 20-over games – Cotterill & Barker, 2013). At the International level, the sport is characterized by nations ‘touring’ other countries in a reciprocal relationship of competition. These tours can lead to players, coaches and support staff being away from home for anything from a few weeks to many months.

Sport psychology, as a profession, continues to face challenges in gaining acceptance in the sport and exercise sector in the UK (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). While there has been a significant increase in the number of full-time positions available over the last 20 years, it is also true that these still form the minority of opportunities (Barker, & Winter, 2014). The norm still appears to be hour-by-hour, or day-by day contracts, and short-term consultancy agreements (Cotterill, 2017). This status quo presents some challenges both to the practitioner and the client. First, these agreements often offer little job security to the practitioner with payment often made in arrears via invoices based on at best flexible employment contracts (Guest, 2004). Second, the employment of external practitioners by the client often bypasses normal Human Resources (HR) processes, meaning there may be no clear job description or agreed terms-of-employment. These opaque arrangements can prevent the establishment of clear expectations between practitioner and each respective client (Cotterill, 2017). There is also an increased pressure on sport psychology practitioners to demonstrate ‘impact’ early and continuously (Hackfort & Schinke, 2017). The ability to demonstrate immediate ‘impact’ or effectiveness, in turn, is hindered by the lack of clarity regarding the job the practitioner is being engaged to do.

There is also the issue of who is qualified to practice as a sport psychology practitioner. In the UK the title of ‘Sport and Exercise Psychologist’ is a UK Government regulated title. In order to use the title you need to be on the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) register of qualified practitioner psychologists. To be a recognized psychologist you need to be a Chartered Psychologist by the British Psychological Society; to be an Accredited Sport and Exercise

1     Scientist you need to be accredited by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science  
2     (BASES - Cotterill, 2011). Discussions regarding what constitutes being appropriately qualified  
3     are beyond the scope of this paper (see Woolway & Harwood, 2015 for a review), but current  
4     practice in the UK expects sport psychology practitioners to hold at least one of these levels of  
5     recognition. This being the case, at least one of these qualifications should be specified as a  
6     requirement to be engaged as a sport psychology practitioner. Anecdotal evidence suggests that  
7     many non-Olympic sports receive psychological support from practitioners who are neither  
8     registered nor accredited. There is also evidence that this is a challenge facing the profession  
9     more broadly (Hackford & Schinke, 2017).

10           The categorization of sport psychology practitioners as ‘consultants’ rather than  
11     ‘employed’ staff can in itself be problematic. For instance, in the business world, management  
12     consultants have been viewed in a particularly negative light (Kitay & Wright, 2004). Often  
13     consultants are conceptualized as confident practitioners taking advantage of uncertain  
14     managers selling the latest fad or fashion; or individuals who are highly skilled in  
15     manipulating the impressions of the clients, and are able to command exorbitant fees (Pinault,  
16     2000). It has been suggested that the life of the external consultant in a business context can  
17     be challenging as it is “an on-going effort of convincing the client of one’s usefulness and  
18     contribution” (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004: p.543). Though while the  
19     experiences of external consultants have been explored in broader business contexts there is a  
20     lack of understanding of those experiences within sport psychology.

21           It has also been suggested that the nature of the challenges encountered by sport  
22     psychology practitioners operating within elite and professional sports teams have arguably  
23     been inadequately considered to date (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; Nesti, 2010).  
24     In part this may be due to the inaccessibility of elite team environments (Eubank, Nesti, &

Cruickshank, 2014; Nesti, 2010). As a result, a greater focus of the experiences of sport psychology practitioners at these levels is required.

From an outsider perspective it would appear that cricket is a sport that should be well-disposed to embracing sport psychology. In part this is due to the key concentration challenges the sport presents and the significant amount of time available for cognition, reflection and evaluation during performance. Nevertheless, at some levels this acceptance is not the case. As a result, there are few studies considering the sport psychology landscape within the sport. This is problematic as there has been an increased focus in the associated literature recently on understanding sport psychology practice within specific sports (e.g., Hackfort & Schinke, 2017). Bull (1995) reflected on his experience working in cricket with the England women's team, highlighting the importance of "the immersion approach" (p.159), and building strong relationships with coaches, players, and managers. The importance of immersion and interpersonal relationships was also reported by Barker, McCarthy, and Harwood (2011) in their reflecting on working in developmental academies in cricket and soccer. Cotterill (2012; 2017) further highlighted a lack of understanding by client groups in professional regarding what sport psychology practitioners can do, and as a result how best to maximize the effectiveness of the sport psychology practitioner. The small number of studies in cricket represent a limited understanding of the sport and the associated challenges for sport psychology practitioners.

From a broader perspective, while understanding the experiences of practitioners is important to the future development of the profession there is little research that has explored the experiences of those practitioners at different levels within the same sport and specifically not in cricket. Also, unlike some other sports there is limited research exploring the experiences of sport psychology practitioners at any level within the sport of cricket. Developing this understanding is important as the unique nature of cricket and its associated challenges means practitioners cannot simply apply the lessons learnt from other sports. As a

result, there were two specific research question for this study. First, What are the experiences, reflections, challenges and opportunities perceived by practitioners regarding their own roles delivering sport psychology in elite cricket, in the UK? Second, How do these concepts and themes form interrelationships and co-dependences that may inform changes to future practice?

### Method

#### Participants

A criterion-based approach to sampling was adopted for the current study (Patton, 2015). Specifically, participants were recruited who had a formal role working with UK-based professional cricket clubs, and had more than 12 months experience. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants were recruited who could co-construct knowledge that was relevant to the aim of this project (Rhind et al., 2013). There were 12 (8 male and 4 female) volunteering participants ( $M_{age} = 36.4$  years, age range: 25 to 54 years;  $M_{experience} = 8.67$  years  $M_{experience\ cricket} = 5.75$  years range: 1 to 13 years) out of a total of 15 who were approached to participate. Further descriptive detail for each participant is provided in Table 1. The level at which these participants were working was classified as either ‘semi-elite’ or ‘competitive elite’ according to Swann, Moran, and Piggott’s (2015) four-point classification system for elite level performers (semi-elite, competitive elite, successful elite, and world-class elite). Swann and colleagues described *semi-elite* to be athletes whose highest level of participation is below the top standard possible (such as talent development programs); *Competitive elite* was described as athletes regularly competing at the top level for their sport (such as top divisions or leagues).

#### Procedure

Participants were interviewed to gain an insight into their experiences of working as a sport psychology practitioner in professional cricket. Initial contact with the participants was

made via an e-mail where the main focus of the project was explained in broad terms. The participants were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45-90 minutes and afterward to review a verbatim transcription of the interview. The respondents were all interviewed via the software program Skype, on a video call (Hanna, 2012). All of the participants were informed orally of the aim of the research project, that data would be treated confidentially, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The interviews were recorded via the 'call recorder' software program (Skype, 2014), which is used for capturing Skype video calls, and also with a regular digital voice recorder (i.e. back-up recorder) to ensure that no data were lost on the audio track. This Skype-based approach is similar to that adopted by Elsborg, Diment, and Elbe (2015) in interviewing sport psychology practitioners who worked at the 2012 Olympic games. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. To strengthen the inter-reader reliability, a second party read through each transcription while listening to the interview (Patton, 2002). The transcription was sent to the interviewees via e-mail and they emailed back with their corrections and comments to avoid misunderstandings in the transcription process. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Winchester ethics committee.

A non-foundational approach to judging the quality of qualitative enquiry was adopted in the current study (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The specific criteria for judging the quality of this research included: the contribution it makes to the field, its coherence, sincerity, resonance and credibility (Tracy, 2010). A key aim of this study was to co-construct knowledge that contributes to the understanding of sport psychology practitioner experiences and expectations working in the sport of cricket and to report substantive findings. This substantive report of the findings was also achieved by using detailed quotes from a number of specific participants when creating the results section of this manuscript. The coherence of

the findings in this study was achieved via discussions with a critical friend (Didymus, 2017). In terms of sincerity and the truthfulness of the data, it appears that rapport was effectively gained because participants spoke openly and fully about their experiences. Evidence of this included the length of the interviews, and that participants mentioned players by name, thus suggesting that they trusted the researcher not to disclose any such confidential information about their role working in an elite and public environment. Regarding resonance, the core aim was to produce findings that are valuable in professional cricket contexts (Tracy 2010). The credibility of the data was enhanced by spending further time with the participants ‘virtually’ before commencing the interviews, by sharing each practitioner’s interview transcription with that individual to encourage reflection and dialogue about the data that had been deemed most pertinent, through maintaining a reflexive journal and an audit trail of the research, and by having a critical friend to scrutinize and discuss pertinent matters.

A descriptive phenomenological philosophy (Englander, 2012) underpinned the current study. This standpoint underpinned the selection of participants, the number of participants in the study, the questions asked, and the data collection procedure adopted. This phenomenological philosophy also determined the structure of the manuscript, specifically with the development of separate results (containing the emergent thematic analysis) and discussion (exploring the implications of the themes in relation to existing literature) sections (Smith & Osborne, 2015).

### **Data analysis**

The interviews lasted an average of 93 minutes with a range of 75-150 minutes. Interviews were terminated when saturation of information was achieved. This saturation was represented in the current study by participant repetition, and when the interviewer felt no new information was emerging (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then read and re-read as the first author assumed the posture of indwelling (Maykut &



Morehouse, 1994). The data were analyzed using the NVivo software package. (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2016). This process involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data in an attempt to understand the participants from an empathetic, as opposed to a sympathetic point of view. Given the flexible nature of the interview guide, as well as the need to explore relationships between themes, an inductive approach to data analysis incorporating the constant comparative method was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), similar to the approach adopted by Elsborg et al. (2015). Specifically, an initial discovery sheet was used to identify any recurring words, concepts and/or ideas that emerged from the raw data. This helped to create analytical memos and develop provisional coding categories and higher order themes. The interview transcripts were then re-examined in order to establish whether any other data should be considered under each of the higher order themes (e.g., as sub-themes), or whether any new higher order themes needed to be created. Once no new higher-order or sub-themes emerged from the data, it was assumed that the analysis was complete. Explorations of similarities and differences about performance preparation and warm-ups were also sought across interviews.

### Results

The analysis of the data highlighted seven super-ordinate themes and 40 subordinate themes. These super-ordinate themes and associated subordinate themes are presented in Figure 1. and include: *the role (eight subordinate themes); perceptions of the psychologist (four subordinate themes); consultation approach (three subordinate themes); limiting factors (eight subordinate themes); first team environment (four subordinate themes); challenges faced (seven subordinate themes); and proposed changes (six subordinate themes).*

#### The role

Participants highlighted that often the role of the practitioner was determined in a transient fashion at the local level by the coach. With the younger age groups (academy level)

the role of ‘relationship counselor’ was consistently mentioned by participants. There was also a perceived lack of clarity in terms of the role of the sport psychology practitioner and the associated performance indicators. This lack of clarity was highlighted by participant four who reflected that:

I always got the feeling that initially it was a case of ‘right in order to get this funding from the ECB [National governing body] we have to have certain pieces of the jigsaw in place . . . as a result no-one really knew what a sport psychologist did, or what the job should be . . . just that they should have one [sport psychologist].

There was also a strong feeling among participants that the sport psychology practitioner role required much more of the practitioner’s time than had originally been agreed. One example of this view was presented by participant three:

I felt it was really important for them [players and coaches] to see me and for me to give the impression I was passionate about learning about the sport by watching the players perform and train. I was given the opportunity to give input after sessions, so if I didn’t have anything to say it was you know I’ve got nothing extra add, but often I would be invited down from the balcony at the end of the training session, to give some context to things that I’d observed or things that I might want to work with them on, and that was a really good opportunity. I wasn’t paid for the extra time, but I would not have been able to do my job without it.

This perspective suggests that there is a lack of appreciation at general level in cricket of the nature of the sport psychology practitioner role, and in particular the broader engagement that is required to be effective as a practitioner. The nature of the specific environment itself also impacted upon the role performance. For example, participant eleven suggested that:

It was quite restrictive initially in terms of being classroom-based, with a mental skills focus. I suppose thinking back to when I first qualified, that would have been my

1 comfort zone, but it was restrictive. It would have been useful, certainly with the  
2 emerging players, to have less educational workshops and more opportunity for small  
3 group work, one-to-ones, and more involvement in the actual practical coaching, and  
4 integrating psychology into that, rather than it being seen as something that's separate.

5 The participants also highlighted the significant anxiety and stress associated with the  
6 short-term nature of the role, offering little job security. Verbal agreements were often at a  
7 local level with the coach or academy director, and were often not formalized contracts, or  
8 even short-term consultancy contracts. This perspective was highlighted by participant eight  
9 who reflected that:

10 It is sometimes really difficult, not knowing if you are going to be retained or not, and  
11 just when you think 'well that is it, I have not heard anything about this year' you get a  
12 call from the coach saying 'we want you to come back again this winter'.

13 This lack of certainty can make it difficult to plan time and workload effectively. This  
14 outcome also increases the likelihood of the sport psychology practitioner 'over working' to  
15 make a good impression by investing the hours required to do a good job rather than the hours  
16 they are paid for.

17 Trying to ensure continuity of the role was also a challenge, with the preferred  
18 approach within the county system to employ sport psychology practitioners, particularly at  
19 the academy level, during the winter months. This approach resulted in the sport psychology  
20 practitioners often only seeing the players in the off-season making it difficult to accurately  
21 identify performance-related issues, and to assess intervention effectiveness. This experience  
22 was highlighted by participant nine who reflected:

23 You have got to really challenge, to stress the importance of you being there all year  
24 round rather than just during winter training, otherwise the players see it as something

that they do in preparation and don't necessarily transfer over into the competitive environment. They sometimes just see it as school-like education. This lack of understanding regarding what a sport psychology practitioner does and how they could be used was also highlighted by participant six:

I still think there's a little bit of a misconception that they perceive the role of the sport psych to be very clinical, so it's still, certainly with some of the physios, that view. I think they perceive the role to be quite sort of clinical based, so you know if somebody's got depression or presenting signs of you know depression, I think they would see me as the fix.

There was also a view among participants that the role of the sport psychology practitioner differed significantly depending on whether you were working at an academy or professional level. This view was highlighted by participant seven who stated that:

I think the academy is about education, it's about awareness. There is still some of that with the first team, but primarily it's about education and awareness and skill. Skill acquisition, skill development of some of the mental skills that we talk about. At pro-level it's probably about re-enforcement, it's about reminding, and we certainly do quite a lot of person-centered solution focused work with the pros, primarily due to a lack of time really, on their part to engage in developmental work.

### **Perceptions of the practitioner**

The way the sport psychology practitioner was perceived within the environment was an important influencing factor in the role. A number of the participants highlighted the importance of being perceived as being trustworthy. Also, that this perception differed in different groups (players, coaches, and support staff). There was a distinct difference amongst participants regarding whether they gravitated towards the coaching group within the club, or towards the science and medicine team. In reflecting on how they were perceived by the team,

1 participant one stated “I know that I am viewed within the academy as someone who’s  
2 accessible, who’s visible, who’s supportive, and I’ve been keen to develop this concept of  
3 sport psychology being all about performance enhancement”. There was also a general view  
4 among participants that the perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner were more  
5 positive among the academy squad and younger professional squad players. For example,  
6 participant one reflected that:

7 I think the perception within the young players, and the young professional players, is  
8 one of ‘this is somebody who I can turn to for support, advice, guidance and  
9 feedback’, but that’s predominantly because, I have known them since they were  
10 thirteen years of age and they’ve gone through the academy system.

11 This view regarding the different perceptions was also supported by participant four who  
12 stated:

13 I’ve never had an instance where a player doesn’t want to engage or has been forced to  
14 engage, and I think part of that, at the younger age group is that it’s part and parcel of  
15 the program. So it’s something that they have grown up with, you know we start  
16 under-ten’s with some basic psych workshops but then as they go through the system  
17 they get more and more exposure, and so I think it’s just an integrated part of their  
18 training. We try to do a classroom session and then take the knowledge down into the  
19 hall and build that into a practical session. Trying to make it just part of their training,  
20 just like strength and conditioning.

21 There was also a lack of understanding highlighted throughout this study of who sport  
22 psychology practitioners are, what qualifications they should have, and how to recruit them.

23 This point was illustrated by participant three who reflected:

I think it's just, certainly at our county, word of mouth. I know that there have been some instances of the usual look at the local University, find somebody that's got the name psychologist mentioned in their title and give them a ring; that's been common.

Another factor highlighted by participants in this study was the perceived lack of understanding of what 'being qualified means' within sport psychology meant. Participant seven shared that:

It's all via word of mouth and recommendation. The club do not have a clue about BASES or the BPS, and don't really know what qualifications you should have. No-one at the club ever asked me what my qualifications were, or whether I was HCPC registered.

### **Consultation approach**

A consistent theme that emerged through the interviews was the 'free reign' practitioners had in terms of the approach they adopted, and more generally what they did. Also, the importance of relationship building was highlighted throughout the study. Particularly those participants who had been involved with a club for a number of years highlighted how the fostering of positive relationships could facilitate input at more of an environmental level. This perspective was encapsulated by participant four who stated:

I'm quite holistic in my approach, so I don't just purely look at performance. I do take quite a broad view of things and look at player lives as a whole, developing them as people, and certainly for the academy, I do get involved on a school front as well, and to a little bit, in terms of what's happening there and managing that balance as well. And I suppose I also see my role as helping coaches and the coaching team, well certainly at academy level, to work together and to get the best out of players.

This view was also articulated by participant six who reflected:

When I attend the home games of the first team I would always make a point of

meeting up with the director of cricket, we would spend a good hour or so every day just talking about what we see and what's going on and that type of thing, to support him in his role as well.

### **First team environment**

A number of challenges were specifically highlighted about working at the first-team (professional) level. The most significant of which was the fact that there were few sport psychology practitioners employed at this level. This point was highlighted by participant four who reflected that:

I don't know what the stats are, but I don't know how many counties actually have a psych; what I would call properly attached, not somebody who comes in ad hoc, on the odd occasion, but who actually is attached to the club. I don't think there would be many at first team level.

There was a view among participants that the sport psychology service at the first team level was far more likely to be reactive rather than proactive. One of the reasons for the lack of engagement often at the first team level was the fact that many of the players at this level had not progressed through sport psychology educational programs. This point was highlighted by participant one who reflected that:

I think the culture within cricket's changing, and if I walk into a first team dressing room now, I probably get eye contact and handshakes from probably half the dressing room and the rest would probably look away in terms of what the hell's he doing in here? But the culture is definitely changing I think, as a consequence of, as I said, visibility, accessibility of people like myself being in and around the club.

This view on the evolving first team environment was also supported by participant ten who stated that:

At the first team level, I think over time they have learnt that it's an important area and they need to start engaging with it. I just don't think at a management level they fully understand the role or how you and I would perceive the role.

However, while recent advances are positive there was still a view that the provision of support at the professional level still required further evolution. For example, participant seven stated that:

We are getting some engagement with the pro's but it is still a pretty adhoc. The fact kind of reflects the split views of the coaches regarding the usefulness of one-to-one work with the sports psych.

There was also a further challenge highlighted when working at the professional level that appeared to be quite unique to cricket as outlined by participant twelve "I think the difficulty if you're talking about the pro-level is that so many players go away in the winter, you know actually between November and February we'd probably have like six players around, with many off playing overseas".

### **Challenges faced**

A number of factors highlighted as 'challenges' consistently emerged through the interviews. These included: the amount of time with the players (individually rather than as a group); access to the players (speaking to them in the first place); a lack of awareness of the sport psychology practitioner and their role at higher levels in the club (executive level); space constraints (where they could work with the players); a lack of a job/role description for the sport psychology practitioner; and limited Continued Professional Development (CPD) opportunities (either at the club or more broadly in the sport).

For example, participant one in reflecting on specific challenges highlighted the issue of acceptance with the more senior professionals within the club "I would argue that one of the



1 biggest challenges is credibility with the older players. I think the perception of the sport  
2 psych being somebody who you only utilize or work with when you've got a problem".  
3 Time with the players was consistently highlighted as a specific challenge by all of the  
4 participants in this study, and particularly time accessing the players in the environment. This  
5 point was highlighted by participant two who stated that:

6 Time and access, there's no question. If you're not there one or two days a week on a  
7 regular basis I think it's difficult to actually exert a meaningful influence, and you're  
8 constantly sort of chasing your tail kind of thing. So time and access, that's a major  
9 challenge.

10 The amount of time available to work with the players is important as it can directly impact  
11 upon the scale of intervention and change the practitioner is seeking to achieve. Also, reacting  
12 to changes in the structure of sessions that impacted upon the time available was also  
13 highlighted. Participant three articulated this succinctly in reflecting:

14 I remember doing sessions whereby you were told you had thirty-minute one-to-  
15 one's, and then you'd turn up on the day and get told 'oh actually this has happened,  
16 and you've now got fifteen minutes on a conveyor belt'; so that can be a challenge. I  
17 think the other thing is about making sure that while the coaches are buying-in to the  
18 program, that they make sure that their buy-in is really transparent to the players,  
19 because I do remember a session whereby I was delivering a first workshop to a group  
20 of academy players, and whilst I appreciate the coaching staff are extremely busy, I  
21 was asked, is it okay if I go downstairs as I've got loads to do, and I think for that first  
22 session it was particularly important for the coach to see what I was doing.

23 This issue of time working with the clients is a particular concern as this can impact upon the  
24 quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the client.

Another specific challenge highlighted by the participants in this study related to the advertisement of positions and the transparency of the appointment process. There was a strong feeling among the participants in this study that appointments were ad-hoc at best, and depended on existing contact networks. This point was illustrated by participant four who highlighted that:

Appointments occur through word of mouth and recommendation. I don't think I have ever seen an advert for a sport psychologist in County cricket. There's obviously the fact that the ECB advertise for their national roles, but I've never seen, in seven years, six and a half years, whatever, I don't think I've ever seen a county psychologist job advertised.

This lack of advertising is problematic as it often leads to a lack of formalization to the role, or clarity in terms of the job specification, the specific role, and associated performance indicators.

### **Proposed changes**

A range of desired future changes within the sport were outlined by the participants in the study. These included more CPD opportunities coordinated by the NGB. Part of these proposed CPD developments included the development of stronger communication links between the NGB practitioners and those individuals working in specific clubs. For example, participant two suggested:

I think obviously sharing practice is important, but how do you do that on a regular basis when people are so busy? I haven't necessarily got an answer for that, but I think sharing practice is good, but all that is driven by maybe these common pillars that don't really exist at the moment.

1 There was also a view that, in light of the challenges and demands of the role a greater  
2 understanding of mental health issues, assessment, and referral mechanisms would be  
3 beneficial. This point was highlighted by participant two who stated:

4       There is a need for training on managing mental health, wellness, and developing a  
5       referral network. Regardless of your qualifications, I'm not sure training as a sport  
6       psychologist with a performance focus prepares you for that. So I think yeah, that  
7       would be quite useful, having access to that kind of CPD.

8 This point was also supported by participant five who reflected that:

9       Understanding at what point you maybe would make a referral, maybe even  
10       understanding, you know better understanding of some of these sort of quite unique  
11       responses to injury, which again you know in terms of our sort of traditional paths  
12       within sport science and sport psychology probably are insufficient in my view.

13 Also, there was a desire for much closer integration between the clubs and the NGB with  
14 more sharing of information and practices, and potentially joint intervention delivery. This  
15 point was articulated by participant one who stated:

16       At the moment no-one asks me 'what have you been doing with them, what type of  
17       work have they undertaken'? Similarly, I'm none the wiser as to what happens when  
18       they get to the national squads. It's almost like, a cocooned world where I think  
19       nothing gets shared, nothing gets transmitted back to the counties, for sure, not in my  
20       knowledge anyway. If the communication was better we could achieve more  
21       collaboratively.

22 There were also requests by participants for the development of a specific job description that  
23 could be championed / communicated by the NGB. The view of participants was that this  
24 would help to provide clarity to the clubs, and help to clarify the role of the sport psychology  
25 practitioner and to manage stakeholder expectations. Finally, there was also a feeling that to

be truly effective there needed to be the development of more permanent and full-time sport psychology practitioner positions in the clubs. This perspective was illustrated by participant seven who suggested:

There is more than enough work here to be full-time. Just at the academy level with the different age groups and squads. If I was full-time we could make a real difference. Providing on-going education and support to the players, to help to work both with and through the coaches, and to profile and monitor psychological factors relating to both performance and mental health. At the moment there is simply not enough time. But the club are just not aware of what they are missing, which is a real problem.

## Discussion

The results in this study suggest that the lack of role clarity for sport psychology practitioners is a significant factor limiting the ability of practitioners within cricket to maximize their impact and to provide the best service to their clients. This lack of clarity is particularly problematic as contemporary thinking on external practitioner effectiveness within the business consultancy world has highlighted the importance of clarity in roles, responsibilities and expectations in determining consultancy effectiveness (Chrusciel, 2004). This outcome suggests that greater emphasis is required within the UK to enhance client group understanding of the profession and associated roles (Woolway & Harwood, 2015). A lack of job clarity has been reported as a key organizational stressor in associated fields such as sports coaching (Olusoga, Butt, Hays & Maynard, 2009) and in turn could impact upon the practitioner's broader mental health. To date there is little research exploring organization stress and stressors for sport psychology practitioners, and as such future research needs to explore these key issues in greater detail.

A lack of job security and the part-time nature of the role, as demonstrated by short-term contracts, was also highlighted as a key factor by participants. These challenges have

also been highlighted in other sport psychology contexts (Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, & Zizzi, 2013). This lack of job security has been highlighted as having the potential to have a profound effect on the practitioners' decision-making and the actions taken, such as challenging people or prevailing beliefs within the environment (Hackford & Schinke, 2017). Reduced job security is problematic as research suggests that it can impact upon the practitioners' ethical position and perceived moral duty, resulting in decisions to maximize being retained rather than because it is the right thing to do (McDougall et al., 2015). The lack of job security can also have a negative impact upon working practices, often by having a negative impact upon work-life balance (Fleetwood, 2007). In particular there is a danger for self-employed practitioners to commit to long working weeks (Kodz et al., 2003). Which, can result in reduced time for socializing, exercise and family (Guillaume & Pochic, 2007). Job insecurity has also been linked to lower job satisfaction, a greater incidence of physical health conditions, higher levels of psychological stress, and reduced job performance (Probst & Lawler, 2006).

The perceptions of the client group were highlighted as being an important variable influencing the potential for the sport psychology practitioner to be successful. In particular the degree to which the practitioner was perceived to be trustworthy; a factor that has been shown to be important in the client-practitioner relationship in other domains (Sharp & Hodge, 2013; Sharp, Hodge & Danish, 2015). Another key factor that emerged in this study was the difference perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner experienced when working with the different age groups within the county. Generational differences in the perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner have also been highlighted in other sporting environments (Cruikshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Indeed, these differences in perception reflect the fact that sport psychology has typically been received better at lower levels of sport (as opposed to elite levels - Cruikshank & Collins, 2013).

1           A further significant issue highlighted in this study was a lack of understanding by  
2 client groups of what being qualified in sport psychology actually means. This issue has been  
3 highlighted as being problematic within cricket (Cotterill, 2017) and more broadly within  
4 sport (Hamberger, & Iso-Ahola, 2006; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). In the UK there is a real  
5 lack of clarity for the clients in terms of who they should appoint and what to look for  
6 (Woolway & Harwood, 2015). The profession as a whole needs to invest significant time and  
7 effort to reduce ambiguity in order to protect the public and ensure services are delivered by  
8 appropriately qualified practitioners.

9           Due to the nature of the county club setting the participants in this study needed to  
10 develop good working relationships with a range of stakeholders in order to be effective. The  
11 development of multiple relationships has previously been suggested as being essential in sport  
12 psychology practice (McDougall et al. 2015). Failure to maintain these important  
13 relationships has been suggested as detrimental to practice, and could ultimately jeopardize  
14 the tenure of the sport psychology practitioner (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The role  
15 of the sport psychology practitioner has evolved into a challenging hybrid role where  
16 interventions with athletes are supplemented by a provision of service that extends to the  
17 multiple clients (e.g., coaches and support staff) that inhabit the environment (Moore, 2003;  
18 Nesti, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015). This broader role though is often not factored into the  
19 contractual agreement, increasing overall workload. This ambiguity is often a result of a lack  
20 of clarity regarding roles and outcomes in the negotiation of work. There is an expanding  
21 evidence-base that suggests that just focusing on working with athletes is not sufficiently  
22 impactful at high levels of sport (Cruikshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009;  
23 Nesti, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015) and is becoming increasingly obsolete at this level  
24 (Nesti, 2010). As a result, programs that seek to train and develop sport psychology  
25 practitioners need to consider how to develop the skills and expertise required to be able to

1 achieve this level of impact and influence.

2         A significant reoccurring theme in this study was the issue of the available time to  
3 work with the players. The amount of time available to work with the players is important as  
4 it can directly impact upon the scale of intervention and change the practitioner is seeking to  
5 achieve (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991). Time with the clients is a further concern  
6 as the duration of time can impact upon the quality of the relationship between the  
7 practitioner and the client (Werr & Styhre, 2002). This factor is particularly important as this  
8 working relationship has been highlighted to be a significant component of the ultimate  
9 success of the consultancy (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2013). Further  
10 building on this point, rapport, respect and trust have also been highlighted as crucial to  
11 successful consulting (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015), all of which are dependent on the time  
12 with the client.

13         Finally, the study highlighted a number of issues relating to the advertisement,  
14 selection and employment of sport psychology practitioners. Issues in terms of the types of  
15 contracts offered have been highlighted previously in this discussion. However, concerns  
16 were also raised by participants regarding the process of employing a sport psychology  
17 practitioner. Many participants suggested that there is a lack of transparency in terms of the  
18 advertisement and recruitment of practitioners. Indeed, the norm appears to be that positions  
19 are not advertised, something that has been highlighted in sport more broadly (Ball, 2005).  
20 This lack of advertising is problematic as it often leads to limited formalization of the role, or  
21 clarity in terms of the job specification, the specific role, and associated performance  
22 indicators (Breaugh & Sarke, 2000). Limited clarity in terms of the role is problematic for  
23 both the client/employer and the practitioner (Burgess & Connell, 2006). Not advertising  
24 positions more broadly is particularly problematic for the employer in this domain. As  
25 previously highlighted there is a lack on understanding regarding what being appropriately

qualified means, which may result in individuals who lack appropriate qualifications and training being contracted (Hackfort & Schinke, 2017). This issue could be mediated somewhat with a range of candidates to choose from, but without this choice (through formal advertising) the employer could end up with a sub-optimal service, potentially at a high financial cost (Department of Health, 2010). The presence of this issue suggests that greater guidance is required from the cricket NGB regarding who to employ and how to appoint. Also the sport psychology profession in the UK needs to better articulate who sport psychology practitioners are, the qualifications they have, and the job they should do (Minniti, & Van Raalte, 2016).

### **Limitations and future research directions**

The current study used a sample of sport psychology practitioners working within professional cricket. The structure of the sport with the use of developmental academies and professional squads is similar to some other professional sports such as soccer and rugby union. As a result, some of these findings might also be replicated within these other sports. However, while this is the case cricket is quite a unique sport in terms of its structure, the nature of the competitive season and the size of the off season. As a result caution is required when considering the impact of these data beyond cricket. Future research could explore the experiences of sport psychology practitioners in other sports to explore whether similar experiences, challenges and opportunities exist. Also, while the use of Skype video calls was required to be able to collect the data this method could have impacted upon rapport between the researcher and the participant, and as a result could have influenced the depth of reflection and disclosure (Hanna, 2012).

It was beyond the scope of the current study but it would be interesting to explore the player and coach/support staff perceptions along with those of the sport psychology practitioners. Indeed, future research should seek to explore the interaction of these different



perspectives to better understand the nature of the performance environment. There is also the potential to utilize a more diverse range of methods to better understand practitioner experiences. Complementary techniques could include observation or diary approaches as novel sources of information or as a way to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

### **Practical implications**

The sport of cricket in the UK appears to be increasingly open to accessing sport psychology services. However, current working practices are impacting upon both the experiences of sport psychology practitioners and the relevant employers. The lack of clarity in terms of job description, responsibilities and performance indicators makes it difficult for the sport psychology practitioners to fulfill the role and meet the expectations of their clients. Longer-term planning is also difficult due to the short-term transient nature of the work.

The sport psychology professional bodies in the UK need to work more closely with sports such as cricket to enhance the understanding of the profession, the job sport psychology practitioners do, who to recruit, and how to determine success. These developments would provide a solid foundation to enhance the impact of sport psychology provision within cricket across all level.

Finally, there is also work to do in order to enhance end-user understanding of the benefits of employed sport psychology practitioners rather than external consultants. Ultimately, a greater understanding of the profession has the potential to further enhance the positive impact that practitioners can have across the whole club.

### **Conclusion**

In Conclusion, the current study suggests those involved in the profession of sport psychology in the UK have a significant way to go in order to develop client group understanding of the profession, the required qualifications, and the associated roles that qualified practitioners can fulfill. This lack of understanding currently manifests itself in a

lack of role clarity and limited job security; that can in turn impact upon practitioner role performance and decision-making. Finally, there is a lack of understanding within the field of sport psychology regarding the organizational stressors that impact upon the sport psychology practitioner, their mental health, and performance in the role. As a result, future research needs to explore these stressors from the perspective of the sport psychology practitioner.

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